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NEWS RELEASE

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House passes safety enhancement for small airports

Nethercutt amendment studies control tower operating costs

WASHINGTON – The Small Airport Safety, Security, and Air Service Improvement Act passed by the U.S. House of Representatives today includes an amendment by Rep. George Nethercutt (R-Wash.) that would pave the way to allowing more flexibility in funding the operation of air traffic control towers at small airports.

“When planning to build an air traffic control tower, the operational costs from year to year must be factored in. I wanted to make sure that we at least quantify the need small airports face in meeting the local share of operational costs not covered by the Federal Aviation Administration (FAA), so that we can keep and encourage one of the best air safety measures we have,” Nethercutt said.

Nethercutt’s amendment, which passed 415-12, directs the Department of Transportation to conduct a feasibility study and cost-benefit analysis on allowing airports to use up to 10 percent of their Airport Improvement Program (AIP) grants funds to pay the non-Federal share of the cost of operation of a control tower. The study is due in one year.

“The study would lay the groundwork for a provision to allow airports the flexibility to spend federal money designed for safety improvements on control tower operation costs. These funds are part of an existing program. In some cases, an airport may decide that keeping its air traffic control tower open is the most important thing it can do to improve safety at the airport,” Nethercutt said.

The Walla Walla Regional Airport would benefit from this type of provision. The airport pays approximately \$41,000 annually (16 percent of the total cost) to operate its tower. If the airport was allowed to use 10 percent of its annual AIP allocation, it would be able to spend up to \$100,000 on operating costs.

H.R. 1979 would allow small airports to use their AIP grant money to build or equip an air traffic control tower that will be operated under the FAA contract tower program.

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Currently, the FAA is responsible for building the towers that house the controllers. However, the FAA construction budget is not large enough to pay for the construction of towers at many smaller airports. Many of these smaller airports have commercial passenger service or are very active general aviation airports. Passengers flying there may be coming from big cities where air traffic control is commonplace.

“This legislation will be a tremendous help to smaller airports. Many smaller airports lack an air traffic control tower and as a result, passengers and pilots do not benefit from the safety enhancements provided by air traffic controllers. Today we took a step toward making sure passengers and pilots in small cities will be just as safe as in large cities,” Nethercutt said.

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